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AUTHOR Lin, Jing
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that to build and sustain a democracy, people must continue to review and learn from lessons that humanity has acquired. Historically they must look beyond their local communities and their own countries to see that democracy is still a struggle going on in other parts of the world, and sometimes it is a life and death struggle. Democratic education entails teaching students never to take their rights and freedoms for granted. The theory of democratic education was developed by John Dewey and elaborated on by Maxine Greene. To conduct democratic education from a historical perspective, one of the teacher's tasks is to reveal how socio-political systems, the mass media, and education can indoctrinate, justify, and reinforce oppression and cruelty. To present democratic education from an international perspective, students need to understand that: (1) contextually, people are living in a global village; (2) democracy means allowing multiple perspectives and listening to multiple voices; (3) comparison helps people to gain new perspectives; (4) comparison can shed light on present conditions and provide a vision for the daily struggle to improve society; and (5) comparison can familiarize people with and help them develop empathy, respect, and understanding toward others. (Contains 12 references.) (BT)

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Democratic Education:
A Historical and International Perspective.

by

Jing Lin, Associate Professor
Department of Education Policy, Planning and Administration
School of Education Policy,
College Park, MD 20742

SO 031 676

Jing Lin

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DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION:
A HISTORICAL and INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

by

Jing Lin, Associate Professor,

Department of Education Policy, Planning and Administration

School of Education, University of Maryland

College Park, MD 20742

(301) 405-3568

INTRODUCTION

It might be human nature that we take things for granted even though these things are gained with great difficulty; it might be human nature that we forget lessons that are learned not long ago; it might also human nature that we tend to see "others' problems" as irrelevant to us, as long as our basic living condition is not affected.

In this paper, I would like to argue that in order to build up and sustain a democracy, we must continue to review and learn from lessons the humanity has acquired historically; we must look beyond our local community and our own country to see that democracy is still a struggle going on live in other parts of the world, and sometimes it is a life and death struggle. Democratic education entails teaching students never to take our rights and freedom for granted; but that students must be taught appreciation and their responsibility.

JOHN DEWEY AND MAXINE GREENE ON DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

In the theory of democratic education developed by John Dewey, education is a process for growth; learning is to be integrated with the events of the social environment, and education is ultimately for building communities where there are free flow of information and equal interaction. Education should lead to intelligent behavior, for example, students need to "stop and think" when making critical decisions (Dewey, 1938, p. 64), and to observe and judge in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while" (Dewey, 1938, p. 61).

Further, according to Dewey, society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication. And communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge - a common understanding (Dewey in Ozmon, 1990, p. 158)

For Dewey, individuals do not even compose a social group because they all work for a common end. The parts of a machine work with a maximum of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form a community. If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community (Dewey in Ozmon, 1990, p. 158)

In order to "work for a common end," and for people to be all "cognizant of

the common end and all interested in it so that they regulate their specific activity in view of it" so that they would form a community (Dewey in Ozmon, 1990, p. 158), prioritize historical learning and emphasizing sharing as a global community in democratic education might be an effective route to reach such a goal.

Maxine Greene argues that being a democratic citizen requires resistance to view other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces, and to treat them in their integrity and particularity. "One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face" (Greene, 1995, p. 10). Students must be shown ways of seeing from unaccustomed angles, realizing that the world perceived from one place is not the world. (Greene, 1995, p. 20)

We are living in a world which is more and more connected by technology, trade and common concerns. It therefore is pertinent that we stretch our imagination to conceive conducting democratic education from an international and historical perspective. This imagination, according to Dewey, is the "gateway" through which meanings derived from past experiences find their way into the present; it is "the conscious adjustment of the new and the old" (1934, p. 272). Greene posits that a reflective grasp of our life stories and of our ongoing quests, that reaches beyond where we have been, depends on our ability to remember things past. It is against the backdrop of those remembered things and the funded meanings to which they gave rise, that we grasp and understand what is now going on around us (Greene, 1995, p. 20)

Democratic education from historical and international perspective first and foremost aims at nurturing a compassionate heart for human suffering and a reflective mind for lessons the humanity has accumulated. It has the role "to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (Greene, 1995, p. 28), and to "continually combat life's anesthetics, moving individuals to reach out toward that horizon line." (Greene, 1995, p. 30). As a result, we develop

> the imaginative capacity that allows us also to experience empathy with different points of view, even with interests apparently at odds with ours. Imagination may be a new way of decentering ourselves, of breaking out of the confinements of privatism and self-regard into a space where we can come face to face with others and call out, "Here we are." (Greene, 1995, p. 31)

Breaking away from the confinement of our own immediate experience and "to open up our experience (and, yes, our curricula) to existential possibilities of multiple kinds is to extend and deepen what we think of when we speak of a community" (Greene, 1993, p.13). And

> "Learning to look through multiple perspectives, young people may be helped to build bridges among themselves; attending to a range of human stories, they may be provoked to heal and to transform. Of course there will be difficulties in affirming plurality and difference and, at once, working to create community." (Greene, 1993, p.17)

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Democracy is an institutional form as well as a way of living (Dewey, 1916). Democratic institutions regulate social relationships and distribution of opportunities. An undemocratic political system can kill freedom of expression and thinking while such opportunities can be taken for granted in a democratic society and hence risking the loss of democracy.

Democracy as a way of living relies on constant awareness by citizens of a democratic state on the fundamentals which pertains to be a democracy. They have to realize that democracy is in the making all the time. However, citizens in democratic systems often take the rights they are enjoying such as freedom of expression and association for granted. They tend to forget that people living in undemocratic oppressive systems can lose their lives for speaking out independent ideas. In this respect, an important task for democratic education in North America is teaching students appreciation of the democratic rights and freedom they have been enjoying daily, albeit there are still obstacles to a full realization of their democratic rights, and to become acutely aware of the struggles peoples around the world are waging to achieve what they have.

Democratic education from a historical perspective informs us about human conditions, struggles, mistakes, and wisdom of the past. This argument is based on our belief that:

1. Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it; human tragedies, discriminations of all forms and abuses of human rights, can happen again and again.

2. Seeing our past helps us to evaluate our present conditions and adjust our directions toward the future. The past can be used as a mirror for such reflection;

3. History has many lessons to teach us: we can learn about struggles for human rights, the life stories of democratic fighters and massacres. The awakening of the soul often happens in our situating ourselves in others' position.

Integrating the studying of historical and present events into the curriculum of democratic education informs students about the difficult process of fighting for freedom and equal human rights. Experiences of oppression by different peoples can be exposed, and vivid examples of people waging courageous fight to win freedom can bring democracy home as a live experience. The goal is for students to see that democracy come from hard-won battle.

Crucial in democratic education is the development of critical thinking. Placed in historical, international context, students must be guided to see that critical thinking helps one to reveal lies and expose the oppressive nature of dictatorships. By learning history (such as teaching about the 2nd World War and history of the African Americans), students come to the understanding as what it means to be dehumanized and what respects and freedom truly entail.

Advocating learning from history, I am reminded of the research I have done on the Red Guards in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The Red Guards who were junior and senior high school students between 13-20 had committed horrible violence against innocent people. They beat up their teachers, denounced their parents and killed millions of "anti-revolutionaries" while all the time they believed hey were doing the right thing (Lin, 1991). A very typical form of undemocratic education the students experienced at that time taught them to believe in political doctrines without exercising any independent and critical thinking. Human rights and freedom were to be bestowed on only some people in the society while other fellow human beings were but objects to be victimized. The example of the Red Guards points to the great importance of critical thinking, while the utmost emphasis should be place on the notion that democracy is about human dignity, about equality and justice for all. Historical events such as the Red Guard's story can be used to illustrate how critical thinking should be connected with democratic values and beliefs (Lin, 1994, 1993, 1991).

To conduct democratic education from a historical perspective, one of the teachers' tasks is to reveal how socio-political systems, the mass media, and education can indoctrinate, justify and reinforce oppression and cruelty. Specifically to study historical events, teachers can take students to the textbooks and media propaganda of the time, examining the routinization of discrimination and desensitization of people toward others as valuable human beings. Further, teachers can guide students to examine the underlying theories and principles that justify oppressive systems and practices.

Students are to be encouraged to cross boundaries and place themselves in the state of being of the time, experiencing the fear, the pain, and the loss of dignity of fellow human beings. They should start to ache the pain, fear the fear, shame the shame and ultimately, come to grasp the concepts of human rights, freedom, dignity, respect in a very concrete way.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FROM A INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Democratic education today must also take an international/comparative perspective. I also have studied the student movement in Beijing in 1989. I found that a great deal of the independent and intelligent thinking the participants of the movement demonstrated had developed through the decade long comparison and historical reflection preceding the event. The comparison and reflection enlightened the Chinese people that while undemocratic system can deprive people of freedoms and rights, responsible human beings should act to fight for and defend democracy.

Today, conducting democratic education from an international/comparative perspective become more and more a necessity. The following are some arguments we make:

1. Contextually, we are living in a global village; what happen somewhere else echo home. Global awareness is vital today;

2. Democracy means allowing multiple perspectives and listening to multiple voices; students will not understand what this really means unless they see how globally human beings are working to make democratic work and come true.

3. Comparison helps us gain new perspectives; looking outward helps us looking into ourselves; comparison often results in reflective behaviors (Lin, 1994).

4. Comparison can shed light on our present conditions and give us a scope of mind on our daily struggle to improve our society.

5. Comparison can familiarize us with and help develop empathy, respect and understanding toward the "strangers".

The Twenty-first Century is a critical time in human history, and it is fundamental today that we take historical and global view to see the mission of education. The age we are living in features great development in science and technology. We are experiencing fast and effectively communication. Global economy is shaping the world into a global village. But this is also the age that is full of crises. In the twentieth century, we have built more and more powerful weaponry; countries try to win peace by competing on building the most lethal weapons; Nuclear wars can be triggered and the earth can be destroyed many times over; bio-disease, environmental breakdown, devastating famine and poverty, are threats that are very real in the 21st century.

Democratic education in the 21st century thus has to recognize this global context and we must start us to "look at things as citizens of one planet", to "think, organize and act within one global context." We must treat each other as belonging to a huge family on earth sharing a closely connected future. To truly break down barriers among cultures, races, regions, countries , we must stress our interdependence with each other and with nature, must come to the awareness of human oneness, across time and space. Thus, democratic education today must be taught in conjunction with multicultural education, global education, and expand its vision to teaching students to embrace the world as a community and as one big family.

Democratic education from an international/comparative perspective must help us reexamine the concepts of development, modernity, science, rationality, and otherness. We must concentrate more than ever on building global humane understanding in order to form a beloved community, and on training democratically conscious global family citizens. We must teach the younger generation that we are "all part of a global, interconnected web of life. "We must educate our young people to love and respect each other, to live harmoniously, and to let our common interest govern our decision making on development and social change.

Democratic education should serve to awaken us on our interconnectedness. It should help us to turn to our inner light, which guides us to see what are the true purposes of life. Is it competition, hatred, division, or is it love, forgiveness, respect and understanding? We should in our quest for democracy work to transcend boundaries and move toward and all-encompassing love for each other.

The goal is to achieve freedom. "Freedom is the power of vision and the power to choose. It involves the capacity to access situations in such a way that lacks can be defined, openings identified, and possibilities revealed" (Green, 1992p. 24). Freedom is to act responsibly and intelligently so that the human race can last.

CONDUCTING DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FROM A HISTORICAL AND INTERNATIONAL/COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

To engage in democratic education in the direction we have proposed, we believe that components of the school curriculum should involve the teachers taking the students to

- review current events in the world;
- study the stories of renown democratic figures and their crusade;
- read biographies on the lives of democratic fighters such as Mandela and Ghandi;
- critique cases of human rights abuse;
- review and critique films, stories, documentaries, poems, biographies by themselves.

In teaching, the teachers could focus on the path the humankind has walked to win democracy, to show that democracy is a continuous journey. Students can

study the dream of Martin Luther King and reflects on remaining problems in today's society. Similarly, biographies, films and historical documents can be used to illustrate the struggled difficulty in obtaining democracy. Students should be guided to read the writings of historical and international figures and examine unjust laws and legislation. Especially important is that the students read about how oppressed people win courageous battles to build up a democratic system.

Pedagogical issues involving in this form of education requires that:

- Teaching has to be reflective;

- Teaching has to be critical of structural, ideological inequality, and of blind obedience to authority;

- Students are to be involved in imagining their roles and expanding their vision to take a historical and global perspective to view the making of a democracy.

- Stages of teaching should include: Information provision and research; seeking of facts; formation of informed perspectives; more information for reconstruction of beliefs, values and behaviors;

In sum, the goal of this form of democratic education is to take students to stand high and see the vision of King and Ghandi and Mandela for building an equal loving community. It must aim at nurturing love, respect, forgiveness, and inclusion in the broadest sense. Democratic education should take students to reach beyond local interest and foster a broad mind and compassionate hearts. It must make us kinder. It entails an integration of critical thinking with

caring (Thayer-Bacon, 1993). Democracy could be sustained only when we refuse to take it for granted. Students must learn to see the role they will have to play in history and envision their part in building and defending democracy in the global village.

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